Dr. George R. Knight is Adventism’s “Renaissance man.” By this I mean that through his teaching and writing, Knight consistently reveals a mastery of a number of academic disciplines: philosophy, history, theology, social theory, and cultural anthropology. A prolific writer and a craftsman with words, he is also an accomplished public speaker and presenter. As a balance to the academic life, he is a lover of the outdoors and is always ready for a new adventure, be it hiking, rafting, or sailing. Widely read, he respects the thoughts and ideas of others. Couched in terms of the English game of cricket: he is a superb batsman, a fearsome bowler, and a consummate fieldsman—a genuine all-rounder.

The problem, therefore, when tasked with analyzing Dr. Knight’s contribution to a specific academic field is that at all times the Renaissance man draws upon all his interests and experiences to frame his work. It is a daunting task to discuss George Knight, teacher and researcher of the history of Seventh-day Adventist education, without being acutely aware of the contributions other disciplines have made to the Knight gestalt.

Having just been awarded his doctorate at the University of Houston, Texas, Dr. Knight joined the faculty of Andrews University School of Education in 1976 with the rank of assistant professor. It is of interest to note that within six years he had progressed in academic standing from assistant to associate to full professorship. Knight’s prime responsibility in the School of Education was teaching Educational Foundations, specifically educational philosophy, the history of American education, and the history of Adventist education. He was also responsible for teaching documentary methods in research to both masters and doctoral students. His qualifications lay in two master’s degrees from Andrews in which he had majored in theology and Christian philosophy, and in his doctoral program at the University of Houston, where his focus included both the history and philosophy of education.¹

Teacher

At the time George Knight took up his appointment, no definitive book yet existed on the history of Adventist education. Not surprising, therefore, the outline for the course EDUC517 in 1981 stated, “no textbook will be required.” Rather, it asked students to “utilize resource materials contained in books, periodicals, and both private and public documents.”² For the benefit of his students, however, George had commenced the compilation of a bibliography of secondary and unpublished sources. Eventually, he published it as an addendum to Early Adventist Educators.³ A perusal of the works cited reveals that only three purported to address the scope of Adventist educational history. George, therefore, had precious little to work with! But it was a challenge he grasped with enthusiasm.

Knight approached the challenge in three ways. First, he prepared formal lectures that provided the historical context in which Adventist education emerged, traced the contours of the Adventist search for appropriate educational models for its elementary, secondary, and college institutions, drew attention to turning points in Adventist educational history, and identified some of the key issues in understanding Adventist educational history. Second, at that time he had several doctoral students sufficiently advanced in their research to make presentations on significant figures involved in the evolution of Adventist education: Allan Lindsay on Goodloe Harper Bell, Gil Valentine on W. W. Prescott, and Warren Ashworth
on E. A. Sutherland. Third, he set assignments that required students to utilize two valuable resources on campus, namely the Ellen G. White Resource Center and the Andrews University Heritage Room. Thus, he forced them to identify primary materials and to make historical judgments from those materials. Furthermore, George contributed to the development of these resource centers by passing on primary resources and copies of worthwhile term papers, such as Craig Willis’s identification of the Harbor Springs Institute of 1891 as a pivotal point in our educational history.4

Dissertation chairman

Knight interpreted his role as going beyond the teaching of educational history to include the identification and encouragement of potential researchers into Adventist educational history. During his tenure in the School of Education, he chaired the doctoral committees of four students whose dissertations dealt with early Adventist educators. Allan Lindsay had written a term paper on Goodloe Harper Bell. “By then,” Lindsay recalls, “I was getting intrigued by the life of this man [Bell] and suggested to George, when thinking of my dissertation topic, that I’d like to delve much more into Bell’s life. He encouraged me and I remember him saying that even if you write only 100 pages, so long as it is exhaustive and you have covered all that is available on the man, that would be OK.” Lindsay added, “That it finally ended with more than 400 pages is a tribute to his direction.”5

In the case of Warren Ashworth, a class assignment led him to read E. A. Sutherland’s book Living Fountains and Broken Cisterns. The more he read, the more fascinated he became with this educational reformer. George encouraged him to turn his interest into a dissertation.6 Gilbert Valentine had become aware of George’s growing “reputation of being rigorous in expectations and of good value” as a dissertation chairman. Meanwhile, Gil had become somewhat interested in W. W. Prescott from reading Vande Vere’s history of Battle Creek College–Andrews University.7 That interest increased when a chance meeting with George led to a discussion of Prescott. George opined that there were gaps in our knowledge of Prescott, but warned that Vande Vere had experienced difficulty in finding sources. Challenged by the unknowns in Prescott’s life, Gil requested that George take him on as a doctoral student. Knight agreed and the subsequent dissertation ran to two volumes.8
I was the fourth student to complete a doctoral dissertation under George’s guidance. Like Allan and Warren, my topic emerged from the course in Adventist educational history. For the term paper, Knight provided the class with a list several pages long of potential topics he wanted researched. One item caught my attention, namely “Griggs papers.” It transpired that a carton of papers belonging to Frederick Griggs, one time president of Emmanuel Missionary College, had been found in the attic of a campus building being demolished. The carton’s contents finally ended up in the Heritage Room. My task was to take these miscellaneous papers and to place them in the context of Griggs’s work as an educator. Following his assessment of my paper, George asked whether I saw Griggs, a moderate on the Adventist spectrum, as a dissertation topic. If so, he would be happy to be my supervisor. Concurring with Gil’s assessment of George as a demanding but supportive teacher, I, too, grasped the opportunity to have him guide my dissertation.

Another Australian, John Waters, wrote a term paper on Warren Howell. Again, Knight saw the potential for a dissertation, this time an educational administrator who might be seen as conservative, even reactionary. Regrettably, while a member of John’s dissertation committee, George was not permitted to serve as chairman. This highlighted a problem for him. As professor of Educational Foundations, he supported a number of departments within the School of Education—religious education, educational administration, curriculum and supervision, and psychology and counseling—but was not himself part of a major department. Beginning about 1984, the Educational Administration Department objected to George chairing the committee of a student majoring in their discipline. This development contributed to the eventual ending of his relationship with the School of Education and the cessation of mentoring of further doctoral dissertations in the history of Adventist education within the School of Education.

In addition to teaching, George developed a passion for writing. In 1979, he wrote “Battle Creek College: Academic Development and Curriculum Struggles,” in which he analyzed early Adventist efforts to clarify educational goals and practices. He highlighted the tensions between the classical traditionalists led by Sidney Brownsberger and the reformists championed by Ellen White. His paper does not appear to have been published at that time, but a copy was placed in the Heritage Room.
E. M. Cadwallader, in his *History of Seventh-day Adventist Education*, focused principally on institutions. George, on the other hand, perceived the importance and significance of thought leaders—those who influenced the course of events. He, therefore, conceived the idea of a book highlighting the role of significant persons. Hence, in 1983, *Early Adventist Educators* was published. George as editor called upon nine other scholars to write on key persons whom he perceived had influenced Adventist education. He, himself, wrote three of the twelve chapters. (George graciously listed me as co-author of the chapter on Frederick Griggs, but as I recall, my contribution was limited to offering suggestions as to the structure of the chapter and providing the documents that supported it. He did the writing.) As editor, George also provided the one-word descriptors designated for each educator, such as “James White: Initator,” “Edward A. Sutherland: Reformer,” and “Frederick Griggs: Moderate.” Two of George’s chapters were particularly important. His first chapter, “Early Adventists and Education: Attitudes and Context,” outlined the social, educational, and religious milieu in which the selected educators functioned. His second chapter dealt with “Ellen G. White: Prophet” and remains the most succinct and balanced presentation of Ellen White’s role in and influence upon Adventist education. In addition, in this chapter, George hinted at what he considered a crucial historical linkage. He wrote: “The revival in Christian education went hand in hand with the revival of Christocentric theology.” Later he would state this with greater emphasis. “Minneapolis, with its stress on Christ’s righteousness, Harbor Springs, Avondale, and the elementary school movement were not unrelated. Each event led to the next, and resulted in vigor and growth throughout the system.”

In 1983, *Adventist Heritage* published an article by George in which he explored the possible links between Oberlin College and the Adventist search for an educational model. Earlier Adventist historians, such as Cadwallader and Vande Vere, had perceived a connection between Oberlin and Adventist education through Goodloe Bell. George, on the other hand, saw E. A. Sutherland as a more plausible link between Oberlin and Adventism. In *Studies in Christian Education*, Sutherland made extensive references to Oberlin in articulating his reformist platform. Furthermore, George perceived a broader picture. While he identified seven points of agreement between the early Oberlin philosophy and Adventists, he also drew attention to a significant difference, namely the “theological underpinnings” that drove the reform programs at Oberlin and Battle Creek.

Knight correctly placed the Adventist search for educational theory within the
context of an era of educational reform evident across the northeastern United States during the period from 1830 to 1860. George concluded that “the early leaders of Adventism were on the cutting edge of reform even though their reforms were neither unique nor ahead of their times.” Also, in the flow of time he saw Oberlin as being in the initial phase of educational reform and Adventism occupying a place in its later phase. Furthermore, in an interpretive comment, he made two interesting observations. First, that Adventism’s response to social reform in the nineteenth century reveals a reforming impulse deep in the church’s psyche and to deny that would be to alter the nature of the Advent movement itself. Second, that in a healthy way our Adventist forefathers were very much aware of the social issues of their times. The caution to contemporary Adventism is that we “cannot afford to remain in the nineteenth century. . . . The church is continually challenged to come to grips with issues of the present within the framework of its heritage.”

Early in his tenure in the School of Education, George conceived one of his most important books for Adventist educators, namely *Myths in Adventism*. The volume reveals several things about George Knight as a scholar. First, his capacity to grasp quickly the ideas of another and to reframe them from his own perspective. As he explained in the preface to *Myths in Adventism*, in 1979 he had received a copy of Arthur W. Comb’s book, *Myths in Education*. Although written from a humanistic perspective, George immediately saw its possibilities for examining problem areas in Adventist education. “His [Comb’s] treatment of myths in general inspired me to critique Adventist education using the myth format. Within twenty-four hours after receiving the book, I had my ‘myths book’ outlined in essentially its present form.” In that twenty-four-hour period, Knight had identified eighteen significant Adventist educational myths (literary myths required two chapters).

Second, his book reveals his skill in bringing to bear his wealth of knowledge across several disciplines. *Myths in Adventism* is an excellent example of the masterful way in which George draws on the fields of philosophy, theology, sociology, and history to present his case. A third point we might make is that the book reveals his fearlessness as a scholar. Once armed with irrefutable evidence, George does not hesitate to explode a myth. That might mean that he was merely being an honest scholar, but we must not forget that myths come with strong emotional baggage. As he explained in the foreword to his twenty-fifth anniversary reprinting
of the volume in 2009, the book “almost suffered a still birth” as his publisher was unwilling to consider the work, telling him “that Adventists wouldn’t buy that kind of book.” The fact that “Myth” was in the title and served as the organizing theme was problematic, but George dug his heels in and insisted that the title stay as he had proposed it. Exploding a myth can be as dangerous as defusing a mine.17 That George did not explode just one mine, but a complete minefield, and lived to tell the story, says much about his skill in identifying, analyzing, and refuting myth. And his hunch proved right. The time was right, the book caught the Adventist imagination, and sales were brisk right from the start.

Probably George’s last major contribution to Adventist educational studies while in the School of Education was to write a chapter for a book edited by Gary Land.18 The intent of the book was to sketch the social and historical context in which Ellen White wrote, preached, and guided the emerging Adventist Church. In fourteen pages, George provided a comprehensive overview of nineteenth-century education in the United States. He made clear the issues and deficiencies in American education that stimulated Ellen White’s reforming zeal. Implicitly he placed Ellen White in that line of nineteenth-century educational reformers extending from Horace Mann and John Oberlin to Francis Parker and John Dewey. This chapter again emphasized the importance Knight placed on the issue of historical, social, and cultural context. Neither Adventism in general nor individual thought leaders acted independently of a wider context.

Department of Church History, Theological Seminary: 1985–2006

Mid-1985 saw George move from the School of Education to professor of church history in the Andrews University Theological Seminary. The transfer provided George with a far broader canvas upon which to develop his interests in the roots of Adventism. It also ushered in a period of more than twenty years in which he published prolifically on Adventist Church history. He did not, however, neglect his earlier interest in the church’s educational history.

During the period 1986–2008, George wrote ten articles for the Journal of Adventist Education. They dealt with important themes in Adventist educational history: the search for a distinctive identity, the role of agriculture in Adventist schools in terms of the church’s mission, the motivating factors that led to the dynamic educational expansion, the relationship between curriculum and
educational purposes, Adventist educational essentials, service (the ultimate aim in Adventist education), the importance of the underlying philosophy to educational outcomes, the role and function of Adventist education in the light of the Apocalyptic, and the missiological roots of Adventist higher education. In each of the articles, Knight moved from historical development to present-day opportunities. A proper understanding of history is to inform the present.

In 2001, George provided two lengthy articles to the *Journal of Research on Christian Education*. The first article used the provocative title “The Devil Takes a Look at Adventist Education” to explore a range of pitfalls into which Adventist education has or might fall into. At one point, rather wistfully, George asked the question: “How many people does Adventism have employed full time or even most of the time on the philosophy of Adventist education and its sister discipline, history of Adventist education?” His estimation was that the number is “zero,” a neglect that he implied played into the devil’s hand. Although primarily an examination of philosophical issues, the article is important from a historical perspective, for it reinforced the emphasis Adventist educators have placed on the school as a redemptive agent. George opined that Ellen White’s linking of “redemption and the *imago Dei*” might in fact be her major contribution to Christian education. The second article traced in detail the emergence of Adventist educational aims from a shaky start in 1872 to bolder clarification by 1900 and a fully shaped system by the 1940s.

George has published widely on the broad canvas of Adventism. Many of his books, such as *If I Were the Devil*, have included sections that explore the history of Adventist education within the context of other developments within the church. Although such explorations of our educational history have of necessity been more general, they have been important, however, because they have kept Adventist education before the general Adventist reader and have reinforced the idea that, within the mature Adventist Church, education is an important component.

A well-published historian within Adventist circles, George has also been called upon to contribute to several books intended for a broader Christian readership. Beginning in 1984, a series of six books edited principally by Thomas C. Hunt and James C. Carper explored religious schools and schooling in America at elementary through tertiary levels including religious seminaries. George provided six articles in which he outlined the historical development of Adventist schooling within the given categories. The first of these was particularly important, for it
revealed that he had by 1984 identified four distinct periods in the development of Adventist education: Adventist educational roots, 1853–1891; a reform period, 1891–1903; a period of growth and organizational development, 1903–1940; and a period of maturity and clear identity, 1940–1982. It is interesting to speculate whether he would now add a post-1982 period in which Adventist education has been engaged in redefining its educational goals and basic principles in the context of the twenty-first century. However, through his contributions to these six books, George served to inform the broader American public on the nature and purposes of Adventist schools and tertiary institutions.

In 1993, George proudly advised that Andrews University had established a PhD program in Adventist studies. It had been available at the Theological Seminary since about 1985, and he transferred into this to help give it more rigor. His 1993 advertising brochure announced that the avowed purpose of the program was to “expand the frontiers of knowledge regarding Adventism.” The development during a twenty-year period of massive archival holdings at the Heritage Centers at Andrews and Loma Linda Universities, and at the General Conference Archives had made the program possible. While quick to commend the many who contributed to the development of those archival holdings, Knight would be reticent to play up the dynamic his own enthusiasm for Adventist history played. Although Adventist studies is a broad field, there may yet be persons and issues in Adventist education that will warrant attention by a new generation of PhD students.

A personal note

My prior tertiary study had been at two Australian universities. What struck me early was how much George was like my Australian professors. Knight lectured in-depth, sharing with his students the extent of his knowledge on the subject. He was, however, thoroughly American. Somewhat proud of my English language background, my first assignment for him I wrote in British English. George's red pen underscored each occasion where I had failed to use American spellings and usages. When I remonstrated that I was using “correct” English, he politely pointed out that was a moot point. More emphatically, he reminded me that I was attending an American university and would in the future meet American literary standards. The clincher came when he said, “Down the track you will write your dissertation and will definitely need to comply with American standards.” QED!
Over the three years I wrote term papers and a dissertation under his tutelage, I found my writing skills greatly enhanced. George would not tolerate sloppy sentence construction or ideas lacking clarity. I well recall the draft of my first dissertation chapter. It was returned to me with red ink comments filling every page. It took me several days to recover from this blow to my ego, but recover I did, and the red-ink medicine stood me well. John Waters shared with me his similar experience and confided that initially he felt so discouraged he almost made the mistake of asking George to step down from his dissertation committee. Waters also made an observation that held true for me. While George’s written comments could be ego-deflating, his oral observations were always supportive and encouraging. Both John and I share an indebtedness to Knight for making us better writers.

George was instrumental in my receiving high honor. Evidently, in conversation with then Andrews president, Joseph Smoot, he mentioned my writing on Frederick Griggs, a former president of Emmanuel Missionary College. He must have presented me in good light, for Dr. Smoot extended an invitation to present a formal paper on Griggs as part of the 1983 Founders Weekend. For me that was one of the highs of my sojourn at Andrews. Thank you, George, for that honor.

During the course of my Andrews years, my relationship with Knight progressed from teacher-student to colleague-friend. That friendship has continued well beyond Andrews. On one occasion in 1983, George and I were talking about the church we love in the context of Ellen White’s counsel that people should be taught to think rather than be reflectors of other people’s thoughts and Solomon’s admonition on getting wisdom and understanding. I made an off-the-cuff comment, “In Adventist circles, thinking has often been treated as a virtue in rhetoric and a sin in practice,” when George cut in and said, “Hold it a minute, I want to write that down!” To my surprise, the comment later appeared in the frontispiece of *Myths in Adventism*. Thank you, George, for immortalizing what may be the only occasion in which I have expressed an original thought.

Apart from his formative influence upon my academic life, he also pushed me to undertake activities that were both physically and mentally stimulating. On one of his early visits to Australia, he inveigled me to go with him to New Zealand and there climb one of the challenging alpine trails. On another occasion, he introduced me to black-water rafting, a surreal speleological experience, and white-water rafting which produced an incredible adrenaline rush. I later enticed
him into crewing for a sail on Sydney Harbor. George has been equally at home in the cloistered study, the dynamic classroom, and the wholesome outdoors.

Concluding comment

How might we remember Dr. George Knight’s considerable contribution to our understanding of Adventist educational history? In summary form, I make ten points—a neat number. First, he took the study of Adventist educational history beyond the narrative to rigorous historical analysis. In this, he searched for patterns and basic themes. Second, he focused on the identification of key turning points and thought leaders and explained how those events and persons influenced the formation of Adventist education. Third, he continually forced his students and others to consider the foundational reasons for Adventist Christian education—that point at which philosophy, history, and practice meet. Fourth, he confirmed the study of Adventist educational history as a worthwhile and productive field of research, analysis, and writing at doctoral level. Fifth, George encouraged the development of major repositories of Adventist historical collections and directed his students in their use. It is perhaps no coincidence that during the last decades of the twentieth century, there has been a worldwide impetus to develop research centers in Adventist studies. Sixth, he has trained several generations of scholars in the discipline of historical research, analysis, and writing. Such scholars are better equipped to undertake historiography. Seventh, Knight has set an example of the fearlessness with which each generation of Adventist scholars must reevaluate past interpretations, hold what is secure, and prune what is myth. And do this with commitment and loyalty to the Adventist Church. Eighth, George, through his writing and teaching, continually stressed the importance of context. Be it a single document or a corpus of work, it may only be rightly interpreted when context is understood. Ninth, he has demonstrated that philosophy, history, and theology can and should co-exist and work together to inform the life and work of the scholar. Tenth, and my last point, the definitive history of Adventist education has yet to be written. Whether George himself or someone else undertakes the task, he has provided the framework for it.

Endnotes

1. For a very brief comment on his own intellectual journey, see George R. Knight, “The Devil Takes

2. Somehow my copy of the course outline and schedule of events for EDUC517 has survived several relocations and the periodic culling of files.

3. George R. Knight, ed., *Early Adventist Educators* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1983), 239–243. The three secondary sources that directly addressed Adventist educational history were Walton J. Brown, comp., *Chronology of Seventh-day Adventist Education*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Department of Education, 1979); E. M. Cadwallader, *A History of Seventh-day Adventist Education*, 4th ed. (Payson, Ariz.: Leaves-of-Autumn Books, 1975); and Maurice Hodgen, *School Bells and Gospel Trumpets: A Documentary History of Seventh-day Adventist Education in North America* (Loma Linda, Calif.: Loma Linda University Press, 1978). Of the remainder of the published sources, fifteen were biographies, fourteen the histories of educational institutions, nine were general church histories, two were biographies of educational leaders, and eight fell into other categories. Of the unpublished sources, ten were doctoral dissertations, twelve master’s theses, and there were four others.


5. Email, Allan Lindsay to Arnold Reye, May 22, 2012.


8. Email, Gilbert Valentine to Arnold Reye, April 14, 2012.


